

AARP drops out of Social Security forums, distances from Bush overhaul plans

By Leigh Strope, Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- AARP, already under fire from within its over-50 membership for endorsing the new Medicare law, is backing out of Social Security forums it agreed to sponsor with the Bush administration and from a group advocating a system overhaul to allow stock market investing.

The first of three town hall meetings organized by AARP, the Social Security Administration and the National Association of Manufacturers was scheduled for Jan. 15 in Minneapolis.

After inquires from The Associated Press, AARP notified participants Monday afternoon that it was dropping out on the ground that the forums would be too politically charged in the aftermath of the Medicare flap. Social Security, like Medicare, is always a hot-button, divisive issue in elections.

David Certner, AARP's federal affairs director, said the organization decided the forums were too close to next year's election. The group's board met Friday and endorsed the decision.

"It was simply easier for us to be doing our own events and not be connected to groups with partisan agendas," Certner said, adding that AARP wanted to "avoid the politics of it as much as anything."

The nation's largest advocacy group for older Americans already faces a backlash from some members for endorsing the Republicans' Medicare legislation. The support of AARP, whose 35 million members make it a powerful political force, helped the GOP win passage of the bill, which President Bush signed into law last week.

Seniors have been ripping up or burning their AARP membership cards and flooding the group with complaints in what has been characterized as the largest revolt in its ranks in decades.

The group has defended its support of the Medicare plan, which for the first time provides a prescription drug benefit starting in 2006. AARP says the plan will provide financial relief for millions of Americans after years of political gridlock in Congress.

The Bush administration, with the stock market climbing and a re-election campaign under way, is renewing its push for an overhaul of Social Security to allow personal investment accounts, a move supported by the manufacturers' association.

The planned forums were a major part of the administration's strategy to start a public dialogue about the need to shore up future funding of the pay-as-you-go system, which in 2018 should begin to pay out more in benefits than it collects from workers' payroll taxes.

AARP's participation would have helped give credence to the administration's argument that reform is necessary. AARP has tried for years to educate all Americans about the future financial problems the system faces.

The group supports the concept of personal investment accounts, but only if they are added to the system without diversion of money that pays for Social Security's traditional benefits.

AARP opposes the Bush administration's plan to let younger workers, whose payroll taxes now fund current retirees' benefits, divert a portion of that money into their own investment accounts.